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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a glimpse of the current picture of education in rural Scotland. Scotland has many small schools, and not all of these are in geographically isolated areas. Although Scotland's population has decreased in the past 20 years, the decline has been mostly in urban areas. Remote areas are becoming more cosmopolitan as highly educated people relocate to rural areas, either for life style reasons or to work in the North Sea oil industry. Educational policy has moved away from closure of small schools and now provides additional funding for small schools in many parts of the country. In areas where larger consolidated schools have been built, local communities have shared in the decision-making process. Throughout the 1980s, there has been an upsurge in attempts to develop parent-school and community-school partnerships. Community schools range from those that simply make school facilities available to the community, to those that are actively involved in community development. National discussion papers were produced in the 1980s that aimed to improve practices in schools and provide an appropriate and effective education for all. Many features being promoted as the ideal have long been components of education in small schools. Inservice education and staff development have been a problem in rural schools, but both the government and colleges of education are attempting to meet the educational needs of rural teachers by providing extra paid time for staff development and by developing distance education techniques. (SV)

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EDUCATION IN RURAL AREAS OF SCOTLAND

Mary Urch

ED 386 367

Introduction

It is important at the outset that I make it clear that this paper is not a report on a research project, nor is it an exhaustive account of Scottish education. It is no more than one person's attempt to provide a glimpse of the current picture of education in the rural areas of Scotland, based on a small selection of illustrations. I am very aware of what it doesn't cover and of the dangers inherent in such an exercise. I will do my best not to make too many sweeping generalisations in the process.

In his report on the O.E.C.D. research project on education in sparsely populated areas, Jonathan Sher drew attention to the fact that, while there are vast differences in the various contexts in which education is provided across the globe, the issues which arise are the same. Since being here, I have been struck more by the similarities than the differences. It is this that makes the idea of a network of concerned individuals and organisations, countrywide and international, collaborating to share ideas and experiences, resources and research findings so relevant.

I intend, therefore, to take some issues with which this conference is concerned and look at them in the Scottish context - rurality, current policy towards education in rural areas, community participation, the curriculum, staff development and technology.

What is rurality in the Scottish context?

There are three points that need to be made here:

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1. We do have remote areas in Scotland. Any definition of remoteness will depend as much on an understanding of what isolation means as on distance. One's perception of isolation is often more closely related to the accessibility than the location of services and large centres of population. Many people living on islands in Scotland felt threatened recently by the government's proposal to withdraw subsidies from the ferry services on which they depend so much.

   Remote areas are part of our geographical inheritance. As a result, we were never able to embrace the notion put forward in the Plowden Report (1967) in England that schools with less than one hundred on the roll were not viable as effective primary schools. Small schools, while not comparable to isolated education in the Australian context, are a fact of life in Scotland and will continue to be so.

2. It was the belief of the early reformers of the Scottish Church that the people were the church and that every individual was morally responsible for not only his own salvation, but also for the well-being of his neighbours. They believed in education as the means of achieving this aim and it was their intention to provide a minister, church and school for every parish. They were thwarted in the attempt because the wealth of the pre-reformation church found its way, not into their coffers, but into the pockets

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of some wily prelates of the old regime. Nevertheless, this idea remained at the forefront of Scottish thinking and, by a variety of means which we don't have time to go into here, had more or less been achieved by the time the 20th century dawned. The result of this is that:-

a. the Scots have always placed a high value on education;

b. no distinction has ever been made about educational provision in different parts of the country; and

c. many of our small schools are in areas which are not at all remote.

3. Since the Education Act (Scotland) in 1871 made elementary education compulsory for all children, the state has accepted full responsibility for the provision of that education and has gradually extended its remit to include six years of secondary education. While some parents choose to, no parent needs to pay for a child's education other than through normal taxation.

British society has undergone a period of significant change during the last decade. Some of these changes are the direct result of the policies and legislation of the government. Others reflect not only the economic climate in the country, but also a change in attitudes towards the protection of the environment and the notion of what constitutes progress. Bigger is no longer necessarily thought to be better and many rural communities have seen an influx of new residents as a result of a move away from the big urban centres and their problems. Modern technology is making it possible to operate at considerable distances from business centres, so long-distance commuting is a more common phenomenon.

It is worth noting that while the population of Scotland has decreased by approximately 100,000 in the last twenty years, the population of every region, except Strathclyde, Lothian and Tayside where the major urban centres are located, has increased. The population of Glasgow in the same period is down by 250,000 and Dundee and Edinburgh have each decreased in numbers. The exception is Aberdeen where there has been a slight increase, presumably in relation of the development of the oil industry in the North Sea. The population of Skye has increased by 20%. While close examination of the statistics would show a more complex picture, it is at least true to say that we are not experiencing widespread depopulation of rural areas.

It is not only the size but the nature of these communities which is changing. I was interested to learn that on one small Orkney island, the only children of school age are from incoming families. There is a more cosmopolitan flavour in the remote areas than ever before. Many of those now residing there are highly-educated and/or bring with them their considerable experience of the wider world. They are not the kind of people who are prepared to accept passively the status quo and whatever life has to offer. While some have chosen to relocate, others (particularly those employed in the oil industry) find themselves obliged to bring their families to settle in isolated areas and are determined not to place them at a disadvantage as a result. These people are very concerned about the provision of high-quality education for their children.

What has happened to policy?

The views of regional councillors have altered considerably. Closure of small schools is no longer an issue. Local authorities are anxious to be seen to be promoting the viability of rural communities and it is recognised that keeping the school open despite the costs involved is vital in this. Indeed, even though there has been pressure on local authorities to reduce spending, there is evidence of positive discrimination in favour of small schools in many parts of the country, which has

been translated into hard cash. Highland Region has recently increased education's share of the budget and much of the extra money has been used for the refurbishment of rural schools where, for example, disused schoolhouses have been converted to provide improved facilities and additional storage. Orkney and Shetland have both invested in a large number of new schools.

While composite classes have been accepted as a fact of life, the pupil-teacher ratio has continued to improve in the country as a whole. There have also been efforts to improve the staffing situation in small schools. Some regions have supported them by making an additional teacher available on a part-time basis.

It is now standard practice to make provision for teaching head teachers to have management time free of class responsibility. This has recently been increased in Fife to one day per week. In Highland Region since January, teaching head teachers with a probationer on the staff have been allocated cover for a half day per week to support the new teacher. Secretarial help is also standard in small schools and this has been increasing slowly.

Unfortunately, nursery provision continues to be negligible in rural areas, though it has increased in towns. Fife, proud of their record of 97% provision, have experimented by employing a peripatetic nursery teacher in a conscious effort to meet this need. It has proved an expensive exercise and not necessarily an ideal solution. Schools attempt to establish links with the local play group and where there is a community school, these links are strengthened by the play group's use of the school's facilities.

Despite financial constraints, authorities have tried to maintain the costly visiting teacher service where rural schools get the same share of specialist teachers of the expressive arts and of learning support as their urban counterparts.

Highland Region has pursued a policy of upgrading secondary school provision so that most high schools now offer education for six years. Boarding continues to be necessary, though it is less prevalent than it was.

The creation of the Western Isles Council during the reorganisation of local government in 1975 allowed recognition of a community entity which could look to its own resources for secondary education. Previously, mainland authorities had been hard-pressed to cater wisely for the distant parts of their territory. Many children had to be brought to hostels on the mainland for secondary schooling. After reorganisation, children were sent to the Nicholson Institute in Stornoway, which was an improvement, but which was still a long way from home for some. In many ways, these children were even being asked to experience what amounted to almost a different culture.

In 1978, the Council proposed a new six-year school for the southern isles to be located in Benbecula. At first glance, this seemed to be an excellent idea, but it would have meant a rationalisation of several small two-year schools. The Scottish Office advised waiting for a few years to consider other options such as the possibility of allowing these small schools to grow in their community. Wait they did. The final decision was to go ahead with the new school, which opened only a few weeks ago, but the important point is that the local community, along with the local authority and the government, shared that decision as to what was the best way forward for the community as a whole.

The school in its community

The Scottish public has traditionally trusted the education service to get on with its job and to some extent it might be said that this had led to the service dragging its feet as far as community

involvement is concerned. The government certainly believed this to be the case and introduced a variety of measures designed to face the issue. A great deal has been heard about 'parent power' in the 1980's and accountability is the buzz word.

Where previously children had to attend the school to which they were zoned, the Parents' Charter allows parents to choose their child's school, provided that they meet the transport costs if they opt for other than the local school. It is certainly true that this has had an effect in some urban areas where parents have been voting with their feet and we are seeing some schools actively pursuing what amounts to a marketing policy to project a positive image in the community. A few small schools on the fringes of towns have suffered as a result of this freedom of choice, in that many parents have chosen to transport their children into town schools, where many still believe the children will get a broader experience, both academically and socially. I am aware of the recent closure of one small school in these circumstances. For most parents in remote areas, however, the Parents' Charter is a meaningless concept.

It is also true that local authorities will no longer consider making unilateral decisions about closure or merger. Strathclyde Region were obliged to reconsider a proposal for the rationalisation of several small schools due to public pressure. The impact of the new School Boards and Self-Governing Schools Acts remains to be seen. School Boards may be difficult to sustain in rural areas where there is a smaller pool of parents from which to find people able to sustain the required commitment and the danger of a small number of parents with vested interests controlling the board is magnified in the small school situation. At present, there appears to be no evidence of any significant difference in the percentage of boards established between urban and rural areas. There is an interesting debate going on in Orkney in relation to the merger of two schools on the East Mainland, St. Andrews and Holm. A group on the Holm school board are unhappy with the proposals for the new school and are organising a vote with a view to opting out formally. It will be interesting to see to what extent this small but vociferous group do in fact reflect the views of the community. The authority, meanwhile, are pressing ahead with the new school since the cash has been allocated for this financial year.

Throughout the 1980's, there has undoubtedly been an upsurge in attempts to develop a partnership with parents in the education of their children and to make the school at the heart of its community a reality. In many cases this has taken the shape of improved informal interaction between the schools and their communities and there are many fine examples to be found throughout the country. In some places, there has been a formal designation of the school as a community school with management shared by the Community and Formal Education Sectors. Such schools are to be found in both urban and rural areas.

The term 'community school' has a range of meanings from simply making the school's facilities available for use by the community to the advanced model now widespread in Orkney, where there has been a positive move not to separate provision for formal schooling and community education and leisure facilities. A kind of symbiotic relationship has been established. The school benefits not only from the extra space, but also from the nature of that space, e.g. they may have a large hall that they could not have had otherwise. Minibuses are at their disposal and more and better, electronic and sports equipment can be obtained. The element of voluntary commitment from the community leads to grant-aiding (e.g. from the Highlands and Islands Development Board) which would not normally be available to the school. Communities are encouraged through this model to make things work for themselves. While the head teacher remains responsible for the formal education in the building, the authority, through the School Board, has devolved responsibility for the day-to-day management of the concept to a Centre Committee or Local Community Association. They have been given real responsibility in having been granted 'key-holder status' in being able to make arrangements for any cleaning of the building which is necessary over and above the basic provision by the authority and where there is a

swimming pool, members of the community are offered training to lifeguard standard by the authority so that they can undertake both the administration and supervision of the pool. These measures can be very cost-effective and it should be said that many innovations are more to do with changing attitudes than with spending money.

Teachers have seen the potential for learning in the community school model and are making better use of the local environment and of local resources both human and otherwise. People are the most valuable resource there is in education and we should never underestimate their worth. I would like to pay tribute here to the Australian parents I have met and to those I have only heard about for the role they play in supporting their children in their education.

There are also many signs of outreach on the part of schools where they are giving to the community. One school in Orkney has renovated a group of old fishermen's huts and mounted an exhibition in them as a tourist attraction. Their efforts have been recognised nationally with an award for conservation. In Strathmigle in Fife, the Parents' Association and the local Community Association, in conjunction with the school, organised an early warning system when the river that ran through the village and the children's playground was in spate. They noticed while involved in this how dangerous the playground in general was and how faulty some of the equipment was. They set up an action group which has resulted in both achieving a new playground and in changed local government policy. It has set a precedent for future action groups and committees and has, in the view of the head teacher, enhanced the quality of life in the village. To quote her:

> *This project has been a lot of fun and a lot of hard work. It has taken me into the community rather than the community into the school.*

The role of the head teacher is vital in the development of the concept of shared ownership of the school. The Scottish Education Department recognises this in that one of the modules for the management training for head teachers currently being produced is entitled "The School in its Community".

Another new feature on the Scottish scene is that of adults participating in learning alongside pupils in secondary school classrooms. This is seen as having many advantages in that the children benefit from the interaction with the adults and vice versa. It is also much less costly than evening schools as we have known them in the past, especially in small rural communities where special provision of this kind was often not cost-effective.

The Curriculum

It has never been Scotland's way to consider a different curriculum for schools in rural areas and, in general terms, this continues to be true. What has happened in the 1980's, however, is most interesting.

Many curriculum discussion papers have been produced at national level, aimed at improving the practice in our schools. Running through them has been a preoccupation with how to provide appropriate and effective education for all - in whatever context and at whatever stage in the learning process the learner is at. The main issues might be presented as:-

a. the development of a caring, positive ethos with what has been known as 'the hidden curriculum' being much less hidden; taking an optimistic view of the learner;

b. knowing the children and the context well in order to provide opportunities for active learning which are meaningful and relevant and which make full

use of children's experiences and the local environment;

c. genuine group teaching and differentiated learning; and

d. highly developed management skills.

In other words, it seems to me that what has happened is that the features which have long been evident in the best small schools are being promoted throughout the country as a whole as the ideal.

It is disappointing that limitation of time does not permit further discussion of the curriculum on this occasion. The 1980's have been exciting times in terms of curriculum development in Scotland.

One major government initiative which I must mention is the review of the curriculum and assessment for the 5-14 age group currently being carried out by Research and Development Groups set up by the Scottish Education Department. They are compiling a set of recommendations on the content of the curriculum along with attainment targets. It is the government's intention to reintroduce national testing to our primary schools. We await their reports with interest, but as yet have no way of assessing the extent to which these deliberations will alter the face of education in Scotland.

Staff Development

As I have already mentioned, "accountability" is the word that has dominated the scene in the 1980's. Discussion about schemes for the appraisal of teachers has led to widespread concern throughout the profession. Again, we await the outcome of the government's deliberations based on reports and recommendations gathered in from the regions over the last year.

While teachers have been anxious about the negative aspects of these proposals, there is a positive side which needs to be highlighted. If staff are to be appraised then they must also be supported and the question of staff development programmes has become a major issue for local authorities. Whatever criteria for appraisal are eventually agreed upon will apply equally throughout the country with no distinction made between urban and rural areas. Therefore, authorities will need to give priority to the very real difficulty of providing staff development and support to teachers in remote areas.

The Colleges of Education also need to rise to this challenge. As I have said, Northern College is committed to increasing its knowledge and understanding of issues related to education in rural areas and to improving the service it offers in terms of both pre-service and in-service provision.

Through our pre-service courses, we are seeking to produce reflective teachers who see their professional development as a life-long process and who can analyse a context and plan and evaluate in order to be as effective as possible in whatever circumstances they find themselves. We have also sought to ensure that students get as wide a range of experience as possible including a placement in at least one small school during their four year course.

There is a move to provide flexible in-service education for teachers more directly tailored to their situation and their needs. This is often achieved by a member of the college staff going out to work in an area for perhaps a week at a time with a follow-up visit a month later. Usually, they will work with staff from a cluster of small schools in an area. We would like to see more interaction between these visits and this is the ideal opportunity to use distance learning techniques which we are currently involved in developing. A new course presently being validated is the Certificate in

Open Learning which seeks to promote open learning techniques and to provide people with the necessary skills for the development and delivery of materials. The mixed-mode course, a series of distance learning modules, together with occasional group meetings and tutorial sessions, is currently highly favoured. Along with the negotiated aspect of open learning, it certainly seems to offer maximum flexibility. There is an attempt to introduce a cascade effect in staff development by educating a few individuals, in courses which are part college-based and part distance learning, who can then go out and provide in-service in their school and/or region. These innovations lead to consideration of the relationship between award-bearing and non-award-bearing courses and the degree of credit transfer which might exist between them. This is an issue which is currently being addressed.

These developments go hand in hand with the new technological advances that are currently being experimented with. British Telecom, the Highlands and Islands Development Board and the Orkney Island Council are piloting an experiment in the use of electronic whiteboards to deliver courses directly related to local needs. Occidental Oil Company are considering its use for the delivery of courses on off-shore engineering to its workers on the islands from Robert Gordon's Institute of Technology in Aberdeen and Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh. Thurso Technical College is linked to the system and will be delivering secretarial skills courses to Orkney. Northern College is in the process of considering the installation of the necessary equipment to be able to join in offering this service.

Tele-cottages are becoming a reality in some remote areas and seem set to increase the viability of rural communities, allowing people to operate at a distance from both business and cultural nerve centres. The Orkneys are again seen to be leaders in this field.

One major change has affected the issue of staff development. Following the teacher's industrial action in the mid 1980's, a new set of conditions of services was agreed to by teachers in settlement of the dispute. There are now five days set aside during the session when teachers are in school without children present. These days are designated for in-service education. In addition, teachers are required to work an extra fifty hours per year with twenty of those hours set aside for personal, professional development. They are also required to be present outside normal school hours for thirty hours set aside for consultation with parents. Where schools in rural areas are concerned, one of the main benefits would appear to be the opportunity to interact with members of staff from other schools. There is a deliberate attempt to bring staff together on these occasions for discussion and in-service education. This can only serve to reduce the sense of isolation often felt by teachers in remote areas.

In Conclusion

I am conscious of the fact that I have done little more than skim the surface of what is a vast topic. I am aware that I have barely mentioned the tertiary sector and hope you will forgive the bias towards primary which is my own field. I have also made little recognition of groups with special needs.

I have tried to accentuate the positive but would not wish to give the impression that we have solved all our problems or that we are living in some kind of Utopia - even a rabid patriot would hesitate to make that claim. Many improvements can still be made. Education is about people and their lives and they are complex and rarely static. Many of our people are experiencing economic hardship too and that has its effect in both urban and rural areas. What I hope I have left you with is a sense of the challenge and excitement that being part of the education scene in Scotland in the 1980's has offered those of us that are involved with it. I wanted to let you know that both our rural areas and the education that is happening in them are alive and well and looking forward to the 1990's.